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UNITED NATIONS COLLECTION

The Special Committee of 24 on Decolonization

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United Nations

What is the Special Committee?

The Special Committee on decolonization is the main United Nations body concerned with progress towards self-determination and independence of all peoples under colonial rule. Since its establishment in 1961, it has successfully promoted the transition to independence of a number of colonies. It has helped fulfil two basic aims of the United Nations: respect for the principles of self-determination and equal rights for all peoples, and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

More than 70 million people have emerged from dependent status since the Committee was set up. As millions still live under the colonial yoke, however, this progress, in the words of United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, "gives no ground for complacency". In southern Africa, where white minority régimes continued to oppress the peoples of Southern Rhodesia and Namibia, the situation has been especially grave. The Committee therefore works to promote the combined efforts of the international community to put an end to all forms of colonialism.

Commonly referred to as the Special Committee of 24 on decolonization, its full title is the *Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*.

What role does the United Nations play in decolonization?

The United Nations has been active in the decolonization process from its very beginning. Its success is reflected in the emergence of many countries—in Africa, Asia and the Americas—from dependence to independence and in the growth of United Nations membership from 51 countries in 1946 to 152 in 1979.

The signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945 encouraged the growing determination of peoples under colonial rule to gain freedom and independence. The Charter included provisions covering two categories of colonial Territories—Trust Territories and Non-Self-Governing Territories. Trust Territories were placed under an international trusteeship system established by the United Nations for their supervision and administration. The Trusteeship Council was given the responsibility for the operation of the system. Of the original 11 Trust Territories, all but one—the Pacific Islands (Micronesia)—have now achieved independence or chosen to unite with a neighbouring sovereign State, sometimes under United Nations-supervised referendums.

The majority of colonial Territories, outside the trusteeship framework, were dealt with in the Charter chapter entitled "Declaration regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories". In it, United Nations Member States administering such Territories recognized the principle that the interests of the inhabitants were paramount and accepted as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost their well-being. To that end, they pledged to ensure the political, economic, social and educational advancement of the inhabitants of those Territories, to develop self-government and to assist the peoples in the progressive development of free political institutions.

By 1960 some 30 Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories had attained self-government or independence, but it was evident that progress towards complete emancipation was too slow and needed to be accelerated. This concern led the General Assembly to adopt, on 14 December 1960, the historic *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*.

What does the Declaration say?

The Declaration proclaims the necessity of bringing colonialism, in all its forms and manifestations, to a speedy and unconditional end. It declares that "the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and co-operation".

The Declaration states: "Immediate steps shall be taken, in Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories or all other Territories which have not yet attained independence, to transfer all powers to the peoples of those Territories, without any conditions or reservations, in accordance with their freely expressed will and desire, without any distinction as to race, creed or colour, in order to enable them to enjoy complete independence and freedom."

Adopted by the overwhelming majority of Member States and without a single dissenting vote, the Declaration was an expression of the world's desire to speed up the liberation of colonial peoples. It has given new hope of freedom and independence to millions still living under colonial rule.

Why was the Special Committee set up?

In 1961, one year after the adoption of the Declaration, the General Assembly considered the extent to which it had been implemented. It noted with regret that, with a few exceptions, the provisions of the Declaration had not been carried out and, in particular, that armed action and repressive measures continued to be taken in certain areas against dependent peoples. The Assembly called on all States concerned to act without further delay for the faithful application of the Declaration. It also expressed concern that further delay in doing so was creating an increasingly dangerous situation in many parts of the world which could threaten international peace and security.

Thus, the Assembly decided to establish the Special Committee to examine the progress made in carrying out the provisions of the Declaration and to make proposals for extending its application.

The Committee began its work in 1962.

What is the Special Committee's mandate?

Later in 1962 the Assembly invited the Special Committee to seek ways for the speedy and total application of the Declaration, to make recommendations on each Territory not yet independent, and to notify the Security Council of any developments in those Territories which might threaten international peace and security.

In 1965 the Assembly added to the mandate of the Committee by asking it to pay particular attention to the small Territories and to recommend the steps needed for their peoples to exercise fully their rights to self-determination and independence.

In 1970 the Assembly adopted the Programme of Action for the Full Implementation of the Declaration, assigning to the Committee the task of examining the compliance of all States with the Declaration and with other resolutions on decolonization. The Assembly authorized the Committee to: send missions to the Territories; and meet at places where it could best obtain first-hand information on the situation in those Territories. The Committee was also asked to assist the Assembly in making arrangements, in co-operation with the administering Powers, for a United Nations presence in the Territories to help prepare, and to observe, the final stages of the decolonization process.

With regard to the smaller Territories scattered across the oceans, the Assembly restated its view that the question of size, geographical isolation and limited resources should in no way delay the carrying out of the Declaration.

The mandate of the Committee has been renewed by the Assembly each year after its review of the Committee's report.

How does the Committee fulfil its mandate?

As each year begins, the Chairman of the Committee consults members and other parties concerned and recommends to the Committee the order and the manner of dealing with various matters before it. The Chairman is assisted in this task by the other officers of the Committee and members of its Working Group. The Committee also decides which items it will examine directly in plenary meetings and which will first be considered by its subsidiary bodies.

The United Nations Secretariat prepares background papers on the most recent political, constitutional, economic, social and educational developments for each Territory the Committee will consider. The contents are derived partly from information submitted by administering Powers and partly from published sources. States participate in the work of the Committee on Territories they administer and also provide it with up-to-date information.

National liberation movements have furnished to the Committee additional information on Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), the United Kingdom-administered Territory where a minority Government unilaterally proclaimed independence in 1965; and on Namibia, the Territory for which the General Assembly assumed responsibility in 1966 and which South Africa has continued to occupy illegally. Representatives of liberation movements take part as observers in the Committee's work concerning their countries.

A Government which is not a member of the Committee may, if it wishes, be invited to speak before the Committee on any agenda item.

The Committee receives and considers a number of communications from individuals or groups on the various Territories. It provides an opportunity for individuals or representatives of organizations to present their views in person.

On the basis of the views expressed by its members, the Committee draws up conclusions and recommendations concerning the Territories and submits them to the Assembly. As requested by the Assembly, it also addresses recommendations to the Security Council, and to the specialized agencies and other organizations concerned.

The Assembly considers annually the Committee's report and recommendations, which serve as a basis for Assembly action on decolonization.

The Committee meets for some nine months each year, between January and September.

How and where does the Committee work away from Headquarters?

To obtain first-hand information on the situation in colonial Territories and on the wishes of the inhabitants regarding their future, the Committee,

with the co-operation of the administering Powers, has dispatched visiting missions to a number of Territories, of which several have since achieved independence as noted parenthetically below. In the case of Papua New Guinea, members of the Committee participated in the periodic visiting missions of the Trusteeship Council.

Year of Visiting Mission	*Territory*
1967	Aden (now Democratic Yemen; became independent in 1967)
1971, 1972	Papua New Guinea (independent since 1975)
1972	Niue
1974	Cocos (Keeling) Islands
	Gilbert and Ellice Islands (became independent as Kiribati in 1979 and as Tuvalu in 1978, respectively)
1975	Cape Verde (independent since 1975)
	Montserrat
	Spanish Sahara—now Western Sahara
1976	British Virgin Islands
	Tokelau Islands
	Cayman Islands
	United States Virgin Islands
1979	Guam

The Committee has also sent groups to supervise or observe the conduct of elections or popular consultations in Equatorial Guinea in 1966 and in 1968, the year in which that country subsequently obtained independence, and to Niue in 1974.

In 1972, a special mission of the Committee visited the liberated areas of what has now become the independent State of Guinea-Bissau. In 1976, an *Ad Hoc* Group of the Committee held consultations with the Governments of the sovereign States close to South Africa, known as the "front-line" States, and with the Ethiopian Government.

As empowered by the General Assembly the Committee meets away from New York, wherever and whenever such meetings are required for the effective discharge of its functions. Thus, in connexion with its examination of the colonial Territories in Africa, the Committee met in Africa in 1962, 1965 to 1967, 1969 and 1972, in Portugal in 1975 and in Yugoslavia in 1979. In 1977, the Special Committee, jointly with the United Nations Council for Namibia, sponsored an International Conference in Support of the Peoples of Zimbabwe and Namibia, at Maputo, Mozambique.

What else does the Special Committee do?

Since 1964, the Committee has given attention to the activities of foreign economic interests in colonial Territories, particularly in southern Africa, which are obstructing progress towards freedom from colonial rule. In 1967, it began to look into military activities by colonial Powers in the Territories under their administration that might be impeding the implementation of the Declaration.

In connexion with its examination of the colonial Territories in southern Africa, the Committee maintains a close working relationship with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the national liberation movements concerned.

The Committee has encouraged United Nations specalized agencies and international institutions to assist decolonization efforts, particularly through aid to the colonial peoples of southern Africa and their national liberation movements. It also seeks to increase public awareness of the work of the United Nations in decolonization and has taken part in a number of international conferences organized by non-governmental organizations dealing with the decolonization field.

Which countries are members of the Committee?

The Committee consisted originally of 17 members but was expanded to 24 in 1962 and to 25 in 1979. Its current members are Afghanistan, Australia, Bulgaria, Chile, China, the Congo, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Ethiopia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Sierra Leone, Syria, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Republic of Tanzania, Venezuela and Yugoslavia.

List of Territories with which the Special Committee is concerned (1979)

	Area (square miles)	*Population (approximate)*
Australia		
Cocos (Keeling) Islands	5.4	435
France		
New Hebrides[1]	5,699.9	186,000
New Zealand		
Tokelau	3.8	1,600
Portugal		
East Timor	5,762.5	738,000
Spain		
Western Sahara[2]	102,702.6	132,000
United Kingdom		
Antigua	170.6	75,000
Belize	8,866.7	158,000
Bermuda	20.5	59,000
British Virgin Islands	59.0	13,000
Brunei	2,255.8	185,000
Cayman Islands	99.9	12,000
Falkland Islands (Malvinas)	4,618.1	2,000
Gibraltar	2.3	32,000
Montserrat	39.5	13,000
New Hebrides[3]	5,699.9	106,000
Pitcairn	1.9	60
Southern Rhodesia	150,820.0	6,900,000
St. Helena	159.0	5,000
St. Kitts, Nevis, Anguilla	155.0	67,000
Turks and Caicos Islands	166.0	6,000
United States		
American Samoa	76.0	31,000
Guam	209.0	116,000
Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands	686.8	139,000
United States Virgin Islands	132.8	105,000
United Nations[4]		
Namibia	318,259.1	1,300,000

[1] Condominium with the United Kingdom. The term condominium denotes joint administrative control of one country by two other States.

[2] On 26 February 1976, Spain informed the Secretary-General that as of that date it had terminated its presence in the Territory of the Sahara and deemed it necessary to place the following on record: Spain considers itself henceforth exempt from any responsibility of an international nature in connexion with the administration of the Territory, "in view of the cessation of its participation in the temporary administration established for the Territory".

[3] Condominium with France.

[4] In 1966 the General Assembly terminated South Africa's mandate over South West Africa and placed the Territory under direct responsibility of the United Nations. In 1968 the Assembly declared that the Territory would henceforth be known as "Namibia", in accordance with the desires of its people.

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